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Lowell Houser's Poetic Glass Mural in Des Moines

Mary L. Meixner

Lowell Houser's Poetic Glass Mural in Des Moines

by Mary L. Meixner

IN A DECADE when the Great Depression and the threat of war created an austere and cautious economy, it was uncommon and courageous for a private corporation to construct headquarters that were state-of-the-art in efficiency and aesthetics. At 711 High Street in Des Moines, the Bankers Life Company did just that. Among the innovations was a new molded material called "poetic glass." Iowa artist Lowell Houser would use poetic glass to create enormous yet intricate murals. The concept would draw upon untapped American subject matter, encouraged by the 1930s mural movement; the medium, upon techniques developed by the scientists and glassmakers at the Corning Glass Works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The design and symbolism would draw upon Houser's artistic interpretation of Native American mythology.

Born in Chicago in 1902 and raised in Ames, Lowell Houser left Iowa in 1922 to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. There he met artist Everett Gee Jackson, who became his lifelong friend. In 1923 they made their first visit to Mexico, a trip that would significantly influence Houser's art. Jackson's *Burros and Paintbrushes: A Mexican Adventure* chronicles their four years in Mexico. Soon settled in Chapala, an "overlooked paradise," Houser and Jackson began to paint and draw this "visual world of magic" and its "beautiful, happy, smiling, friendly people." Attracted to the native cultures in Mexico, Jackson wrote, "We felt that they were in touch with something eternal. . . . We had come to Mexico only to visit the Indians."

Houser and Jackson developed a deep respect and affinity for native culture, particularly that of the ancient Mayans. Jackson, in fact, remarked upon Houser's resemblance to an ancient Mayan — his profile sloped back like the distinctive Mayan profile (an elongation artificially induced in infancy). An Indian friend observed the same: "That one there," the Indian said, pointing to Houser, "in the high shoes, as you can see for yourself, has a head formed like those *idolos*" on nearby ruins. Jackson later wrote, "It was in this way that Lowell and I seemed to have acquired an Indian heritage, and I must admit, that on that day, as never before, we felt like Indians."

In 1927, Houser was invited to join the Carnegie Institute's archaeological team at the ancient Mayan monuments at Chichen-Itza in Yucatán. There, Houser joined artists Ann

Left: One panel of the three-part glass mural, created in 1939 for the Bankers Life building (now Corporate Square of The Principal Financial Group). Crowning the lobby entrance, the mural is visible (under the skywalk) at 711 High Street in Des Moines.

PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER, FRONT PORCH STUDIO

Lowell Houser: "I am a little sorry to move out of the Maya field . . . it is so darned rich and so well suited to the round corners of your building."

Axtell Morris and Jean Charlot to record the art of the stone stelae as they were unearthed at the Temple of the Warriors. Tracing and transferring the designs, Houser was immersed in motifs and symbolism of the Mayan civilization. In a 1927 letter to Jackson, Houser reflected, "When I came I thought Maya art was primitive, now I think it is the most civilized that I know. In the collection of a rich family in Merida there is a Maya vase which dates probably to 400 or 600 A.D. in the period of the Old Empire of Guatemala, the earliest period by far, and the most perfect."

TWO YEARS EARLIER, in 1925, Houser and Jackson had been drawn to Mexico City to see the government-sponsored murals that Mexican artists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco were painting on public buildings. Jackson admitted that his own "innocent impression was that they were like funny-paper drawings, only much more refined." But for Houser, the murals were significant and exciting. Certainly many other artists would agree. The vitality of the Mexican mural renaissance would bring many American artists to Mexico to study art, among them Glenn Chamberlain, who would be Houser's fellow artist for the Bankers Life project.

The Mexican mural movement of the 1920s fueled the surge of American mural art in the next decade. In early 1933, artist George Biddle wrote to his old classmate, President Franklin Roosevelt, "There is a matter which I have long pondered and which someday may interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because [Mexican president] Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumber's wages in order to express on walls of the government buildings the social ideal of the Mexican revolution." Biddle's subsequent prospectus, "A Revival of Mural Painting," set the stage for the first United States government programs in the arts. Implemented by artist and Treasury Department official Edward Bruce, the important but short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) began to employ artists in late 1933. Early efforts were focused on embellishing public buildings.

Lowell Houser had returned to Iowa in time to become involved in the PWAP. He was part of Grant Wood's team of artists employed under a PWAP grant to create nine murals for the new library at Iowa State College in Ames. Houser worked on three panels depicting engineering. Despite Houser's technical engagement in these works, he cannot be regarded as a disciple of Wood. His fervor for mural art had already developed in Mexico.

In 1938 Houser installed his own mural project in the Ames post office. This mural was created through another government program, run by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts. In the mural Houser linked the images of an ancient Mayan cultivating corn and of a twentieth-century midwestern farmer. (See "The Ames Corn Mural, *Palimpsest* [January/February 1985].) Certainly Houser's monumental figures, space planes, and Mayan motifs in the post office mural reflect his earlier immersion in Mexican and ancient Mayan culture. These elements would also be revealed in his work for the Bankers Life building.

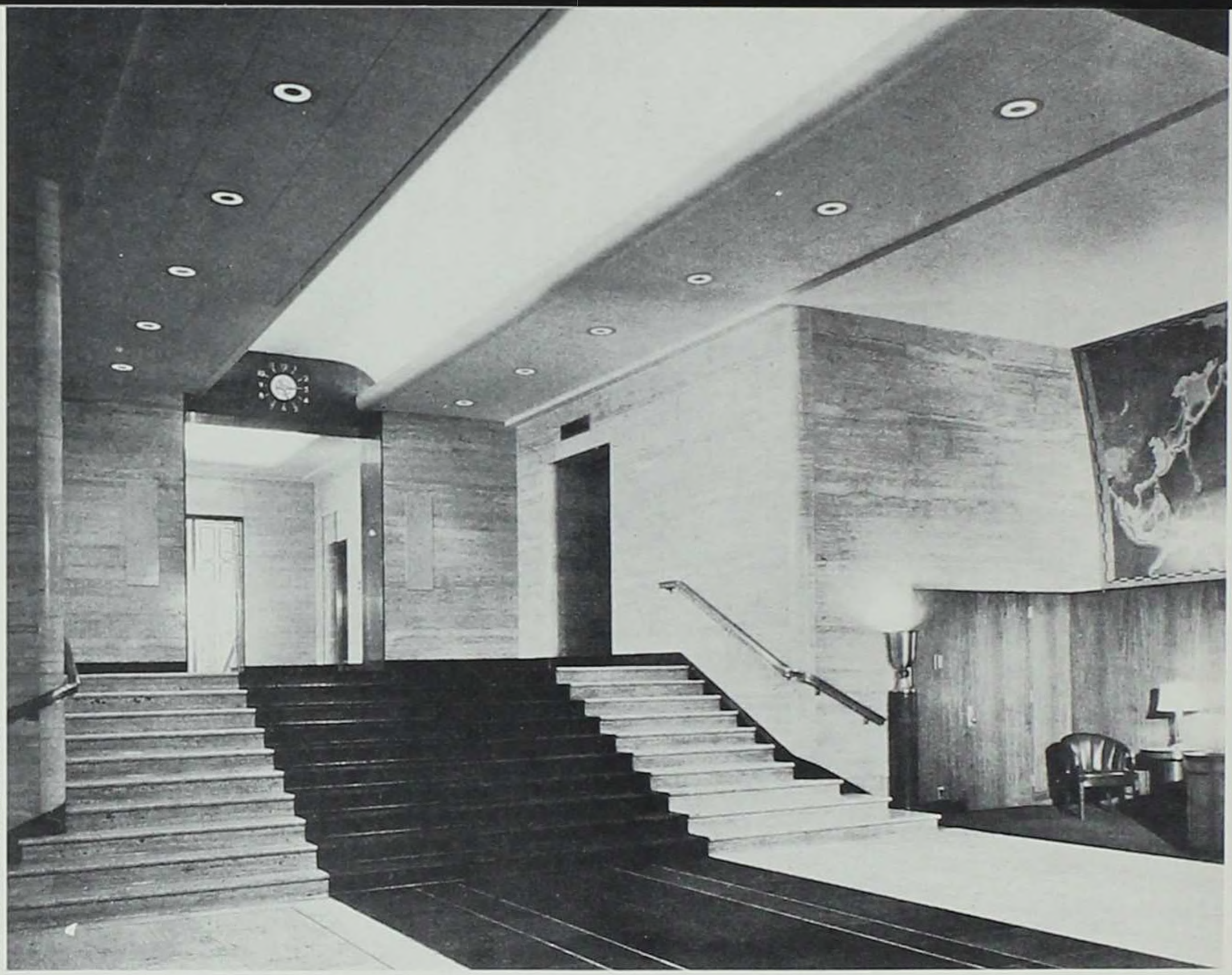
COURTESY THE PRINCIPAL FINANCIAL GROUP

Rounded corners, strong lines, and rectilinear shapes mark the building. The three glass murals (over each door) are recessed in a sheathe of rainbow granite. A walkway has since been built over this entrance.

THE NEW HOME OFFICE of Bankers Life Company (since renamed The Principal Financial Group) may well have been America's largest commercial building in 1939 under construction with private capital. Costing two million dollars, the insurance headquarters would be recognized for its technical innovations and its modern, Art Deco elements.

Leland A. McBroom was the head architect. The Des Moines firm of Tinsley, McBroom and Higgins had produced many modern structures in that city, among them the Des Moines Armory Building. Although McBroom was a popular residential architect in the 1920s in Des Moines — he designed many of the large revivalist-style homes south of Grand Avenue — he proved himself well-versed in modern design of public structures.

For Bankers Life, McBroom planned a building of aesthetic quality as well as spaciousness, efficiency, and adaptability. *Archi-*



ARCHITECTURAL RECORD (JUNE 1940)

Architectural Record **noted "the subdued but harmonious surface treatment" of the main lobby, designed for "minimum cross traffic and conflict." Bronze designs for doors and elevators were by Houser and Chamberlain.**

tectural Record would later report, "Special attention has been given to proper acoustics, color, atmosphere, etc., for employee efficiency." On five of the seven floors, unusually large, open workrooms spanned up to 235 feet; no interior columns broke up the rooms. Coffered light fixtures kept the ceilings uncluttered. Natural illumination entered through casement windows surrounded by glass block framed in bronze. Most interior walls were removable steel panels rather than plaster, built at one-fifth the cost. Rooms had rounded corners for efficient housekeeping. Centralized air-conditioning was combined with perimeter warming and cooling systems, especially planned for Iowa's temperature extremes. Two inches of cork insulated the outer walls. An innovative foundation accommodated the sandy soil of Des Moines; the spread footing and reinforced basement wall worked together, in essence, as a beam. The staff of nearly six hundred could enjoy special facilities — a clubroom, a kitchen, a gymnasium, and rooftop gardens and terraces above the auditorium. There was also an RCA sound system for the entire building, and a pneumatic tube system would whisk documents from one department to another.

Inside and out, the building was a prime example of Art Deco, forgoing naturalism for rectilinear, clean-cut, unsentimental lines. Geometric in ornamentation, its sleek severities made use of smooth surfaces such as polished granite, and materials such as steel, chromium, Vitralite, hollow glass block, rubber tile, and architectural glass.

McBroom had found a prototype for these innovations in an outstanding example of modern architecture in New York City. Constructed from 1931 to 1947, Rockefeller Center was quintessentially Art Deco. Covering thirteen acres, this city within a city included fourteen buildings — offices, retail stores, entertainment, a studio, restaurants, and a public

skating rink. Museum-quality artworks, by thirty outstanding artists, conveyed the theme "New Frontiers" throughout the complex.

Rockefeller Center's artwork included murals and molded friezes of a new medium pioneered by Frederick Carder. This material was marketed as "PC Architectural Glass" by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, of which Pittsburgh-Corning was an affiliate. Carder's fame as a glass designer and technician spanned eighty years. A co-founder of Steuben Glass Works, he had joined Corning as its art director when Steuben became a division of Corning. In 1933 the company was reorganized with more emphasis on creating original, fine art glassworks.

In 1932 the architects at Rockefeller Center asked Carder and his associates to plan works for their RCA Building. Carder had already experimented with glass casting in ceramic molds and, with Eugene C. Sullivan, had invented Pyrex (which they used for a two-hundred-inch reflecting telescope disc at Mt. Palomar).

The glass used for the frieze on the RCA Building was clear Pyrex. Carder then developed Number 712 "Carder soft Pyrex," which gave an appearance of onyx since it was more translucent than transparent. The glassmakers called it "poetic glass." It was first used in works designed by Italian sculptor Attilio Piccirilli and can still be seen in a massive mural at the Fifth Avenue entrance of the International Building of Rockefeller Center.

In Iowa, McBroom's desire to embellish the Bankers Life building with glass murals was inspired by the effect of this handsome material, as well as by the theme of New Frontiers, which used figurative art in the mural tradition. Today, buildings on Fifth Avenue in New York and on High Street in Des Moines preserve the only poetic glass artwork to survive the Art Deco period.

ARCHITECT McBROOM had envisioned the Bankers Life mural as recessed over a bronze-fitted entrance and illuminated from within. The design would call for mural-sized relief sculptures, with the added intrigue of

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD (JUNE 1940)

No columns or walls broke up spacious workrooms.

using the new glass as the material. McBroom sought out two gifted, young artists with proven mural experience. His wife knew well the work of artists Lowell Houser and Glenn Chamberlain. Louise Garst McBroom was a painter active in Des Moines art circles. She was chairperson of the Art Student's Workshop's Executive Committee and had hired Houser to teach life drawing from 1934 to 1936. (At the same time, Houser began teaching in the engineering department at Iowa State College.) In 1937 Louise McBroom was the state art director for professional projects of the WPA and had awarded Glenn Chamberlain and George Grooms a mural commission for Callanan Junior High School in Des Moines.

A Missouri native, and graduate of Roosevelt High School in Des Moines, Glenn Chamberlain was well aware of mural art and federal artists' programs. He had spent a summer at Stone City in Grant Wood's artist colony, and had taken Art Workshop classes in Des Moines taught by Houser and Adrian Dornbush (a prominent Iowa painter who had also been at Stone City). Chamberlain was only nineteen when Eleanor Roosevelt chose his watercolor "Country Road" to hang in the White House. He had spent a summer at Kansas State Park as

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD (JUNE 1940)

Des Moines architect Leland McBroom: "The building was designed to be the most efficient building to house an insurance company that we could conceive."

one of one hundred artists in the nation selected for enrollment in the Civilian Conservation Corps. He was invited to the Bankers Life project while studying with American sculptor William Zorach in New York.

Houser's design would be the chief exterior feature at the south main entrance. The mural would comprise three twelve-foot high panels. These would portray American Indian gods of nature, and human figures applying the gifts of nature to modern technology. Complementing Houser's mural would be Chamberlain's pair of six-by-six-foot glass octagons. Set above the side entrances, Chamberlain's design would celebrate the human family unit. He would also design a large limestone relief panel above the auditorium.

Both Houser and Chamberlain responded to McBroom's theme in the spirit of the 1930s mural movement. Artists involved in the movement were expected to make visual statements about America — its people, its work ethic, and its technology. As public art, most murals were representational in subject matter. Classic European sources for themes were discouraged; American artists did not want to borrow or derive ideas from another tradition. Houser's theme, which had been suggested by the insurance company, would honor Native American Indians, and American workers engaged in diverse industries.

For Houser, assigned to depict the Plains Indian, there would be considerable research. In Yucatán, Houser had developed styles strongly influenced by the ancient Mayan art and by daily interactions with the native people. Although Houser would retain his stylistic devices, his search for American Indian mythology would center on material largely written by white men. These sources have been credited for preserving Indian culture, but their limitations are recognized today. Although the subsequent mural design reflected contemporary awareness and understanding of American Indian culture, Houser's artistic interpretations of the Indian gods reflect power, dignity, and a physical presence that should not today be equated with any intent to stereotype.

A CACHE OF LETTERS between McBroom the architect and Houser the artist chronicle the design and production of the glass mural from September 1938 to April 1939, during which time Houser had begun to teach at San Diego State College under his old friend, Everett Gee Jackson, head of the art department. The letters affirm Houser's disciplined creative process, his reluctance to send work with which he was not thoroughly satisfied, and yet an easy-going acceptance of burdensome changes. They also reveal details of the collaboration between artist, architect, and insurance executive.

Houser's first design concept for the mural depicted a Mayan Indian. McBroom was fully in accord — but not the executive committee of Bankers Life. From the first, Bankers Life president Gerard S. Nollen and vice-president and actuary E. M. McConney had wanted American Indian mythology as a theme. McBroom explained to Houser, "I don't think we would go so far wrong with their suggestion. Mr. McConney has been going into the matter

of the American Indian folklore and symbolism with his usual thoroughness and has found very many interesting myths and symbols . . . he has had a photostat made of a great many Indians in costume showing the beartooth necklaces, head decorations . . . and of their hieroglyphs and their meanings. There is also enclosed [Carl] Milles' Indian in the St. Paul City hall. I rather think they would get away from the extreme grotesque of this head. You can see that Milles has been rather free with his use of symbols, particularly in the headdress of the crouching Indians. Knowing your thoroughness, I feel sure you will get all this information." (Even though Carl Milles's design, installed in 1931, had received national acclaim, it is not likely that McBroom or Houser knew that the Swedish sculptor had first consulted Frederick Carder at Corning Glass Works about casting a free-standing Indian figure on a rotating base. This would have been the largest free-standing glass monument in the world. But although a St. Paul delegation approved Milles's and Carder's preliminary work in molded glass, the work was later assigned to Minnesota artists, who carved the thirty-five-foot figure out of Mexican onyx.)

Houser studied the research and wrote back, "The material seems very good and I think we are going to get a design that in the end we will all like . . . I am getting pretty interested in the Algonquin slant on things. Is it alright to go on with the general idea of big god figures behind the little men doing things? If it is I can be working at studies of the men while I'm absorbing the material to use for the god figures."

By studies, Houser meant he would create the poses needed by drawing from live models and using his thorough knowledge of anatomy. His draftsmanship was based upon the only requisite for drawing, an understanding of form. Although drawing today is more broadly defined, Houser was a traditionalist in using form to create an illusion of reality.

That summer, while still in Iowa, Houser had asked an architecture student, Karl Winkler, to be a model for the mural design. "I posed for all the figures done by Lowell for the glass castings above the main south entrance," Winkler recalled. "[This] was during a period of 3-4 weeks generally on Saturdays in Ames. I think there were a dozen different poses used in the glass relief. Some were like twisting a pipe with a pipe wrench or pulling or pushing. I remember posing, motionless, for fifteen minutes, then having a five minute break. I remember Lowell even continued to make sketches as I rested. They were done quickly and superbly."

BY THE END of September the committee had approved eventual payment of six thousand dollars for Houser and Chamberlain. Some of this would pay for clay, models, an assistant, and other supplies. "Before entering into a final agreement," McBroom explained to Houser, "they would like to see your modified design using the American Indian motif in place of the Mayan . . . show the change in the heads only and send them out to us."

At the construction site, a huge modeling studio had been built, "25 feet high with block and tackle to raise and lower the models, north light, and all that sort of thing," as McBroom described it. He also outlined a procedure to accommodate Houser's teaching duties in California to the construction schedule in Des Moines. "What I had in mind," McBroom detailed, "was for Glenn to go ahead with his two octagonal panels in the full-size model. In the meantime you can be working on your full-size cartoons [the working drawings] . . . Glenn can work on the study for the stone carved sculpture over the auditorium and then will be on the three main entrance panels," creating a clay model from Houser's cartoons.

In San Diego, Houser continued studying Plains Indian mythology and revising the design. "In the end," he wrote, "it might be best to not particularize too much on any tribe — but make the god figure sort of generally Indian." But he insisted that the Mayan civilization was the primordial source for all Indian mythology. "I am a little sorry to move out of the Maya field, because I think it is so darned rich and so well suited to the round corners of your building. And if the building committee only knew it, it has a real meaning for their

COURTESY GLENN CHAMBERLAIN

midwest building because it was the fountainhead of all Indian culture, as the Greek was of most European. . . . But don't get me wrong, I don't mind moving out to the 'provinces'."

By October McBroom and the artists were anxious for a proof that would reveal surface detail and show how the panels would look in light-refracting glass. But a proof made of glass was unfeasible at this stage. The solution arose when Russell Cowles, a former Des Moines artist then working in New York, visited the studio. He suggested that lime gelatin might work. So buckets of green Jell-o gelatin were poured into the wood-framed mold to produce a glassy — if perishable — proof. Chamberlain later acknowledged that "the jello casting did give us a fair idea of how the glass cast would look."

A month later, McBroom prodded Houser for rough sketches. Houser reluctantly sent a drawing: "But I hate to let it go — as you know I always thought of the thing as a very flat and blocky construction. But it seems I always have to go through this naturalistic style before I can get to see the thing in the way I want to . . . I hope you can see thru the naturalism to the design that I hope is under it. I went easy on the Indian cast of features but if they want more of the buffalo nickel Indian, o.k. I can supply it — as you can see I changed the whole Indian figure a good deal. It seemed to me that I had to. At first I thought I would just sketch a different type of Indian face on the old setup but when I did he seemed to be wearing a mask!"

The committee was pleased, but not McBroom. "I do not like it nearly so well as I did the Mayan head," he wrote Houser. "I think the symbolism in its arrangement is swell, but the Indian is too much of an individual Indian, Big Chief Blackhawk, or some other guy, rather than an impersonal god figure, dispensing forth his good and bad to the people who use his gift. That is my principal criticism."

He continued, "I realize how difficult it is to do a creative thing having someone tell you what to do and how to do it. More particularly I would like to see the head more that of a god than an Indian . . . I realize that the Indian of the northern part of the U.S. did not represent his gods in human form so it might be difficult . . . would it be possible to make the human figures larger and have the shoulders of the Indian sort of grow out of the glass as from a mist eliminating the feet and the lower part of the body, then filling the space to some better advantage, between the verticals and the beginning of the small figures?

"Glenny is getting along famously with his study of the stone carving and his other panels," McBroom added. "We had some difficulty with the proper kind of clay but we soon had that corrected."

Houser valued McBroom's innate aesthetic sense. "I was not at all pleased with what I sent you," Houser wrote back. "But I was confused by several ideas that didn't seem to fit together — your taste for the architectural qualities and that of the fellow on the board who showed me a nickel so that I could see how Indians really looked."

In a temporary studio, Chamberlain (in photo) made clay molds of the designs Houser sent from San Diego.

BY FEBRUARY McBroom needed the full-scale art. He decided to take the train out to Los Angeles to meet with Houser over a long weekend. McBroom planned "to work like the devil to bring things to a point where the sketches meet with your approval, mine, and the Bankers Life Committee." The session was successful, and all appeared well.

But all was not well. Back in Des Moines, McBroom hung the drawings in the big temporary studio on view for staff and visitors. A murmur of objection began to grow. McBroom sent Houser a telegram announcing a "great furor" over the twelve naked men in the mural.

Houser responded, "I just now got your wire about the pants. And they go on at once! I know this must be some unexpected angle. Tell me about it. A 'great furor' sounds like much excitement. It's too bad that we didn't know about it sooner. We could have saved an awful

(Article continues on page 44. On next page: Houser's symbolism.)

Houser's Symbolism

Houser's working drawings for the three murals.

Houser's panels depict a Native American fire god and water god flanking a center pair, earth mother god and sky god. The unifying element of a vertical core of fire, earth, and water descends from the godheads to two levels of human figures, which portray earth's contributions to the welfare of humans, their debt to the fire god and dependence on water. Houser's summary follows:

"The Indians thought of the natural elements — fire, sky, and running water — as masculine in character. The earth was considered feminine. Fire and sky had to do with war, and earth and water with peace.

"There was a cosmic marriage between earth and sky, and birds were the messengers between them. The earth mother was called 'Nakomis' by the Algonquins. The corn spirit was the daughter of the earth.

"In the center panel the earth holds in her hands the symbols of fruits and flowers, and wears a necklace of 'mountain' designs, and of butterfly designs (symbol of everlasting life).

"The sky holds between his hands at the top, the symbol of the milky way, under it, the rainbow, then the cloud serpent, and under that, the sky band.

"The small figures represent at the bottom left, mining, at bottom right, petroleum production, above at left, agriculture, and at right, forestry.

"In the panel on the left hand side, the fire god wears a necklace of bear teeth and a hunter's headdress of deer hair and antlers. In Iroquois myth, Ioskeha or 'Light One' wears the horns of a stag, and he and Michabo, of the Algonquins, as gods of light and fire are great hunters and fight with the west wind, darkness.

"Behind the fire god is his symbol, the sun design, and he holds in his hand the water spider that first brought fire to man.

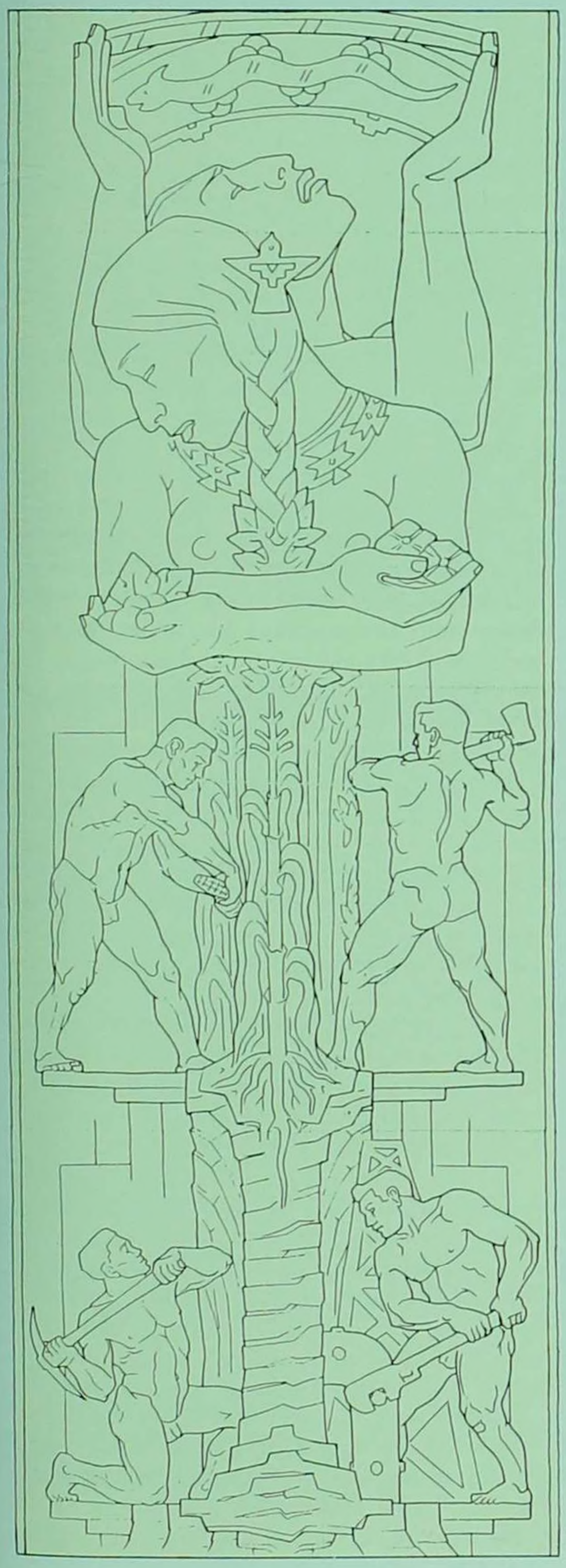
"The small figures represent at the bottom left, man using heat for power, the Diesel engine, at the bottom right, the vulcanizing of rubber for tires, combined with man's use of combustion engines for transportation. Above left, man uses heat for manufacturing metal objects, and at right to warm himself.

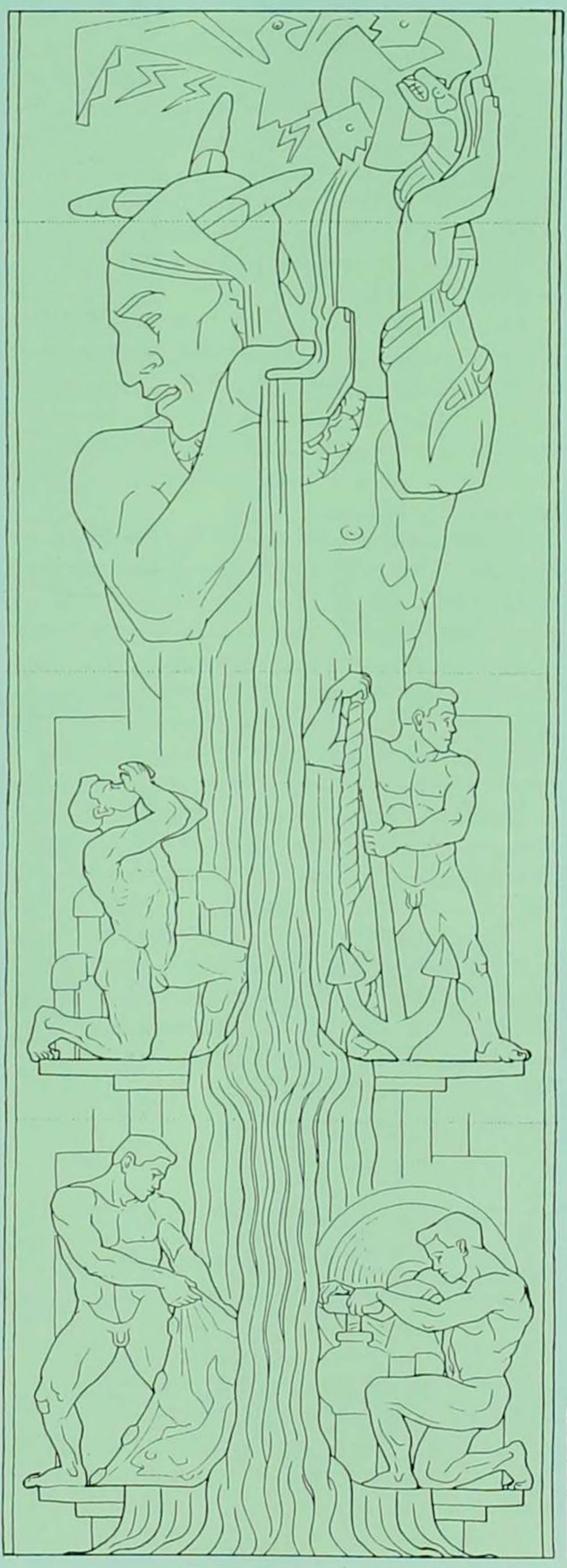
"In the panel on the right hand side, the water god wears in his hair the four feathers symbolizing the four winds which the Indians use in their prayers for rain. Over his arm crawls the serpent, symbol of water. The Algonquins believed that 'the horned prince of serpents' lived in the Great Lakes.

"Behind the serpent's head is the sign 'Avany,' giver of water and the thunder bird appears above the four feathers of the winds. The Indians believed that the water god and the thunder birds were in constant strife which caused the weather changes which accompany the different seasons, and that from this struggle came the rain.

"The small figures represent, at the bottom left, fishing, at the bottom right, water for power, and above left, water to drink, and above right, navigation.

"The Indian types used in the panels may be found in 'The Mound Builders' by Henry Clyde Shetrone, the 'Blackfeet Indians' by Winold Reiss, 'Indians of the Plains' by Clark Wissler, American Museum of Natural History, NY." [Houser also cited Hartley Burr Alexander, Herbert J. Spinden, Lewis Spence, George Catlin, (?) Olcott, and an illustration from E. M. McConney.]





COURTESY THE AUTHOR

(continued from page 41)
lot of time and some money. Overalls are a lot easier to draw than anatomy and the models are cheaper. I just happened to think, that this puts us in a class with Michelangelo — in one respect, anyhow! I think he ran into the same difficulty!" (Michelangelo's free-standing, colossal David wore a fig leaf for several centuries until the sculpture was restored to its original modeling.)

Houser asked McBroom to tell the insurance executives "that I am eager to do whatever they want, but in this respect, I'd like to do it just once." It was April by now and not a welcome time for changes; Houser was working with his students to create a mural for the San Francisco world's fair that year.

McBroom tried to clarify the problem for Houser: "You probably think we are crazy out here, but some of the men thought that we should put pants on the workers, because some of the old maids at the company made a fuss about the appendages on the men. When word got back to the directors they felt that the designs you made were so beautiful that it would be almost criminal to spoil them. I agree with them absolutely . . . I have never seen designs which are so universally accepted as beautiful by both people whose background has been art and by laymen.

"The committee feels as I do, that the design is too beautiful to be destroyed because of silly ideas that might be in the minds of people, but if you can in some way exercise some concealment it would help the situation . . . the idea is not to ruin the design."

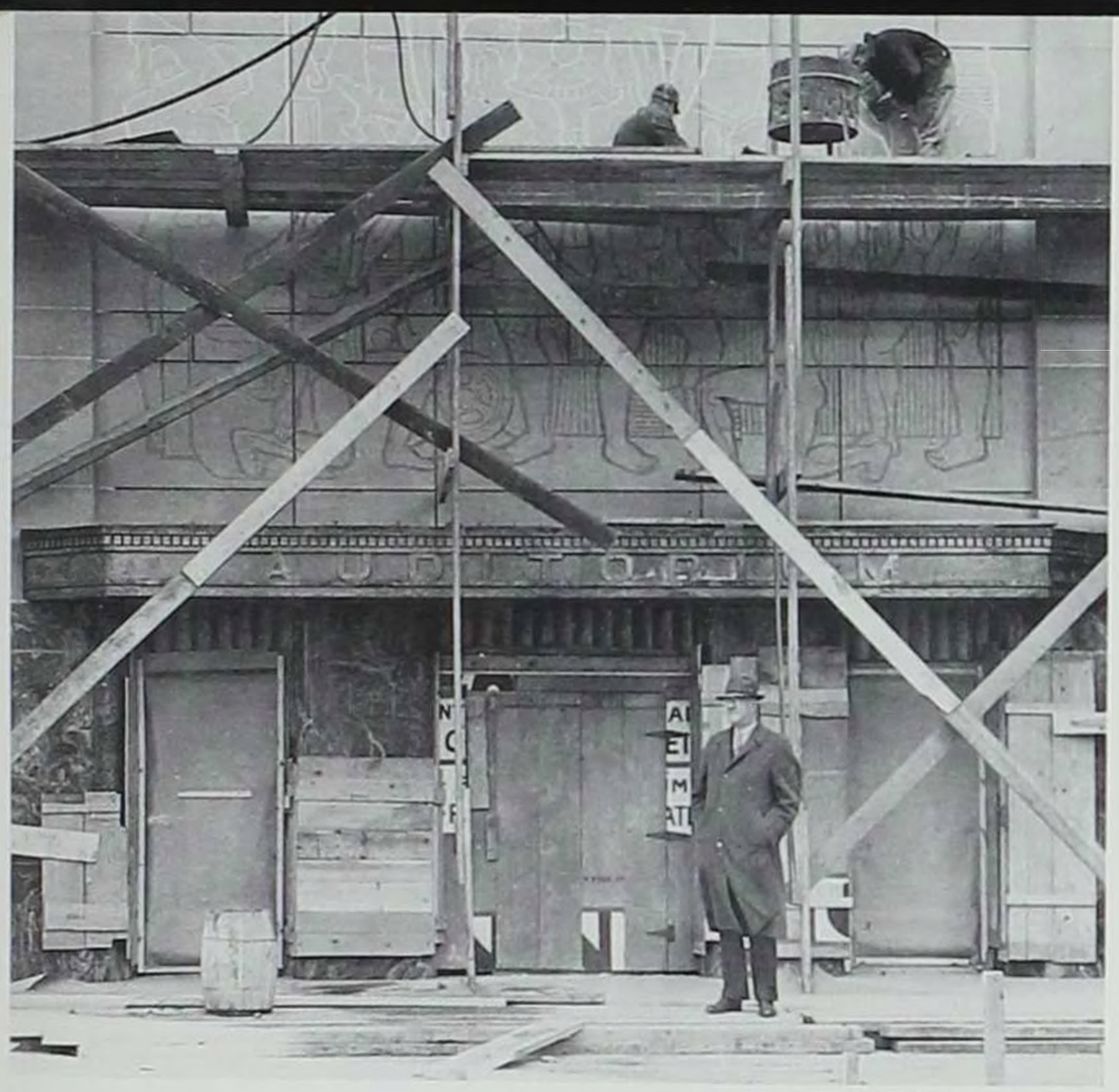
HOUSER HAD EXPLORED ways to enlarge his three panel drawings to their full height of twelve feet. Even the smaller figures would be four feet tall in the finished mural. A photostatic enlargement to that size would distort the image. A process using glass plates was prohibitive in cost, and Houser was running out of cash. Using a proportional grid was tedious but accurate. McBroom recommended the last option: "Regarding your method of blowing them up, I think the good old hand method is the best, even though it does represent some extra time and care. As soon as you get your full-size cartoons Glenn can start. I think the first thing to do would be the center panel. Keep in mind in making the full size that the model shrinks ½ inch in every 4 foot. Your drawings should be overscaled to that degree."

McBroom detailed a final payment plan, more rewarding than the original. "You will be sent immediately $120.00 which will repay you for your time and models to date," he explained. "You will keep time on the work you do and be paid on the work out there on the basis of $30. a week based on a 35 hour week. Glenn will be paid here on the same basis, in summer, $30. a week. The Bankers Life will pay all costs and expenses incurred in the work, including clay, frames, easels, place to work, plaster; and minor items like tools, pencils, models will be paid by you and Glenn. At the end of the work you will receive between you $5000 and if you need money, that can be drawn upon before the work is completed."

He added, "I realize that if some man no more able than you and Glenn have shown yourselves to be but with a well-known reputation were to do the work, his charges would be considerably more than this sum. On the other hand, the value to you as placing you in that position for future work would seem to be considerable."

Delighted with the new terms, Houser and Chamberlain signed their contracts. Houser felt he should pay for enlarging the drawings: "I would be glad to do that, just as I probably should stand for the expense of the models. But no got cash . . . I was surprised when I figured it up at how much it had been. I went through all my sketches of action figures from the model and estimated how much time I had spent on each. I started with those I had made weekends when I was home last summer . . . a lot of those were of actions that we didn't use, and some of them I had to duplicate because they were the first drawings I sent in to you from out here."

Later he wrote, "I don't think the Bankers Life should pay for the [architectural] renderings that Karl Winkler made unless they particularly want to. It was all my idea to hire him.

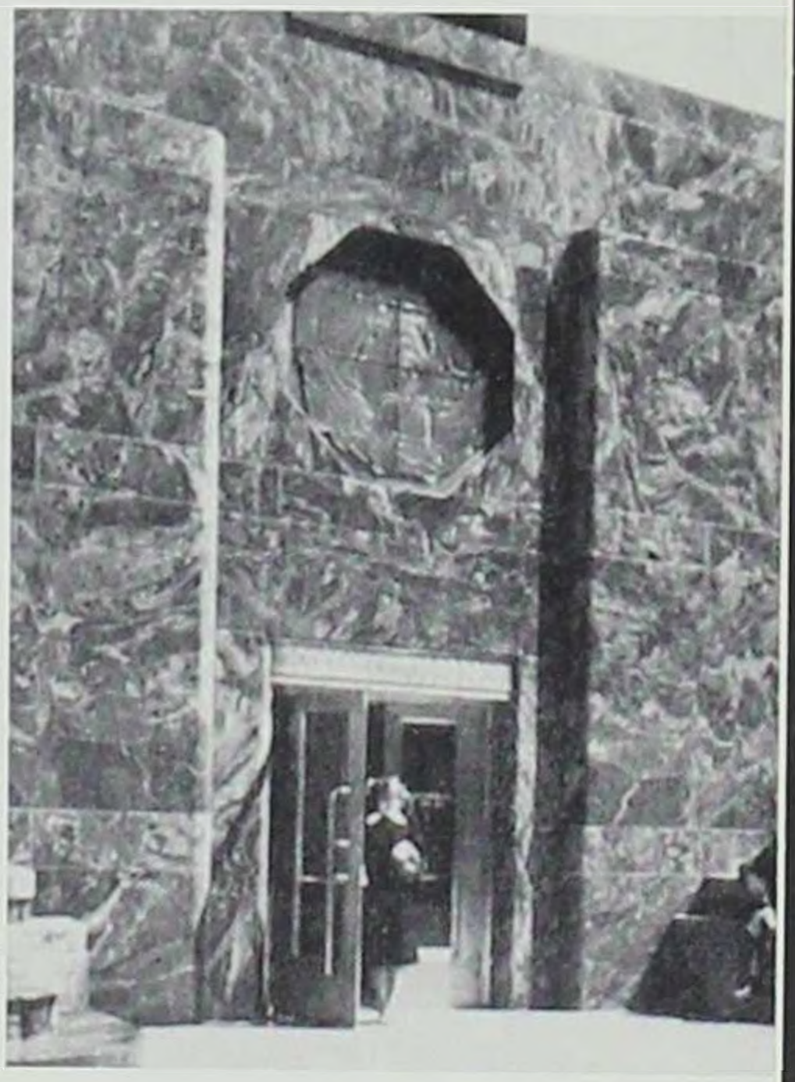


COURTESY THE PRINCIPAL FINANCIAL GROUP

COURTESY GLENN CHAMBERLAIN

COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Glenn Chamberlain (above) designed a family grouping for two octagonal poetic glass murals over the east and west entrances (bottom right). Shown in the mold (bottom left), the design depicts the theme of protecting and nurturing — "the nature of insurance," Chamberlain explained. Top left: Scaffolding hides Chamberlain's emerging limestone carving over the auditorium entrance. The massive carving, stored since a 1975 addition, has been reinstalled over an interior auditorium entrance.



ARCHITECTURAL RECORD (JUNE 1940)

But in case they want to know I paid him $35.00 for the job."

Winkler, the Iowa State architecture student who had also posed for Houser, remembered his first day on the job with Tinsley, McBroom and Higgins: "The studio was very tall because of the height of the work and had large, high windows along the north wall. The place was a conglomerate of scaffolds, tables, canvas and I remember a pedestal, supporting a block of stone which Glenn was carving — titled 'Love' [an independent work]. My job was to produce a rendering of the front of the building, south elevation, which would show the relation of Lowell's work to the architecture of the building."

DURING THE SUMMER of 1939, Houser returned to Des Moines to work with Chamberlain, whose role had been to execute Houser's design and to create his own designs for the glass octagons and the limestone carving. Chamberlain wrote later of his own figurative work: "The theme [in the octagons] is simply the family and the nature of protection and nurturing — which implies the nature of insurance. The limestone carving [over the auditorium entrance] has the rather grandiose theme of agriculture and industry, science and invention." Here, the central figures are a woman with a scythe and a man with a wrench. Two children look up toward an airplane and a bird. They are flanked by two figures carrying lumber and tools.

"As to Lowell's designs," Chamberlain later explained, "I transferred his large drawings onto two-inch deep panels of smooth Plasticine and then carved and modeled the designs. I then made plaster casts of the finished Plasticine models and sent them to Corning Glass."

At Pittsburgh, fine-grained cast-iron molds would be made from the plaster casts. Heated to six hundred degrees centigrade, the molds would be ready to receive the molten glass treated with chromium compounds to achieve the green color. This poetic glass, a special form of Pyrex, was not poured mechanically from a feeder channel, but was "hand-gathered" from pots. Pot furnaces held a series of carefully prepared clay pots, into which the raw material was shoveled and melted. The molten glass was then gathered on an iron rod with a ball-shaped end and was run off into the mold in small amounts. Small imperfections and bubbles were allowed to break up the clearness of the Pyrex base; this gave a sense of fluidity and movement and a hand-molded look.

Resistant to heat, chemicals, and electricity, Pyrex glass has a low coefficient of expansion to resist sudden extremes of temperature without cracking or exerting undue pressure on a surrounding framework. Since depth of the molding could vary from three to seven inches, the annealing, or cooling, process, was a critical step for murals. Because the surface cooled first, it could crack or explode. A special process had been developed that spread a heat-insulating material over the surface to keep the casting hot until a uniform temperature was maintained.

The molds could be no larger than four feet by four feet. Each of Houser's three twelve-foot panels was therefore poured in four sections, and Chamberlain's two identical octagons were poured in four sections each. The final step, therefore, was to join the sections of each work with a special transparent synthetic resin made by Du Pont that had nearly the same refractory power as the glass — thus creating an illusion of a huge, unbroken span of glass.

Molding poetic glass was a costly art form. Chamberlain recently estimated that the Bankers Life murals cost perhaps ten thousand dollars in 1939. (In comparison, Piccirilli's mural at Rockefeller Center cost sixteen thousand dollars.) The cost of the process made it a phenomenon of the Art Deco period.

DURING THE SUMMER when the murals were cast, Houser's personal life was in turmoil. Working overtime on the Bankers Life project, he lived in a hotel with his father, who had suffered a paralytic stroke. His mother had been operated on for cancer. At the end of the summer, he was faced with closing their house in Ames and moving both parents out to San Diego.

The new building was designed with the employees' welfare in mind. Unusual for its day, Bankers Life provided for its workers this sleek, colorful clubroom, as well as a kitchen, gym, and locker room.

Although he had been sought out for more federal post office murals (one in Waterloo, Iowa, and one about the Mound-Builder Indians in Piggott, Arkansas), he acknowledged that these projects were beyond him now. He wrote Edward Rowan of the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, which awarded mural contracts, "All of the time that I have outside my teaching job at the college has gone into keeping things going at home."

After that summer, little documentation exists about the completion or installation of the glass murals. (A film made during the glass pouring has not been located.) The Bankers Life building seemed to be progressing well, judging from McBroom's comments to an editor at *Architectural Record*. In February 1940 he wrote, "I have never seen a piece of architecture which seems to meet with such universal approval by all types of people. Needless to say, it gives us quite a kick." Set in place above the entrance, Houser's murals complemented the rounded edges of the polished rainbow granite that sheathed the base of the building, further softening the bulk of its cubic mass.

In late March of 1940 Bankers Life employees moved into the building, and in mid-April the public was invited to a three-day open house. Two hundred guides were available to give tours of the building, but still only four thousand visitors could be accommodated. In opening remarks at the weekend dedication, the president of Bankers Life extolled, "There is much in the building which is sheer beauty . . . the entrance is of striking impressiveness." A newspaper story echoed these thoughts: "the entrance to the building, too, is of a striking impressiveness which harmonizes with the importance of one of the nation's greatest insurance companies." The *Des Moines Sunday Register* devoted half of a special twenty-page rotogravure section to the building. The national magazine *Architectural Record* devoted over twenty pages to a four-part presentation on the building. "Perhaps every decade or so," the editor wrote, "a farsighted and fortunate architect finds an equally farsighted client with whom he is able to work

in so unhampered and constructive a way that the resultant building actually sets a new standard and serves as a challenge to all concerned with architectural progress. . . . The exterior architectural treatment here is no sentimental wrapping superimposed on and disguising the structural and functional features of the building. The beauty of the finished structure, rather, derives from and grows out of the highest respect for these features."

SOON AFTER the completion of the building in 1940, and faced with ill health, McBroom and his wife sold their home, possessions, and art collection and began a year-long cruise in the Caribbean. They were venturing to the Pacific when McBroom was called to active duty. As a lieutenant colonel, he designed an air-conditioning system for the Pentagon. He served also in England for eighteen months, where he directed large-scale army building operations.

Houser was in the infantry for a brief time during the war, entering the army at age forty. Having worked in New York City in 1929 and 1930, he returned there to work in 1945. Writing to a former student in Rhode Island in 1945, he noted, "I would like very much to come up your way, too, but I am pretty busy working two jobs, and a very good friend from Des Moines is in the hospital at Governor's Island in New York, Colonel McBroom, and I go to see him most of my spare time." That fall, while on a convalescent leave, McBroom died at Fort Des Moines Army Hospital.

Houser returned to San Diego State to teach print-making. He retired in 1957 because of heart problems. He designed a studio, built on the plantation of his brother, Theodore, in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He made four more trips to Mexico and the Mayan ruins, his last in 1962 with his old friend Everett Gee Jackson. Houser died in 1971. His artwork, acclaimed for both its Mexican and Haitian subjects, appeared in the recent exhibition, "100 Years of Art in San Diego."

For Glenn Chamberlain, the Bankers Life project was followed by his pilgrimage to Mexico to study in a free, government-sponsored art school, and then to the Minneapolis School of Art. In the fifties, he was again in New York, instructing at the Sculpture Center, a nonprofit arts cooperative that provided studio and exhibition space as well as instruction for young artists. (Two other Iowans active in the center were sculptors Barbara Lekberg and Harry Stinson.) In 1952 Chamberlain joined the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan as resident sculptor. A 1954 exhibition catalog at Cranbrook noted that the "sensitivity and integrity of his aesthetic vision shows clearly." He taught also at the Des Moines Art Center, Bard College, and the University of Colorado. Today he resides in Boulder, Colorado.

Throughout their careers, both artists proved their versatility as designers. Chamberlain made the models for industrial designer Russell Wright's china ware and furniture, as well as models for Samsonite furniture. In New York, Houser designed a square bathtub, illustrated children's books, and experimented with theater seats on runners.

Artists Lowell Houser and Glenn Chamberlain, as well as architect Leland McBroom, should not be lost to Iowa art history. Each managed to practice his art in the financially troubled 1930s, enriching the built environment with the elegance of Art Deco architecture and design. The rare, gleaming panels over the entrances of the old Bankers Life home office (now Corporate Square of The Principal Financial Group) are a testament in poetic glass to the vision and talents of these three men. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The major source behind this article was correspondence between Leland McBroom and Lowell Houser. The author also corresponded with Glenn Chamberlain, Karl Winkler, architect Gerald Griffith, and artists James Clark, Leonard Good, and Josephine Allen. Important archival material was made available by The Principal Financial Group (Des Moines), Corning Incorporated and the Corning Public Library (both in Corning, NY), and Rockefeller Center (New York). The adventures of Houser and Everett Gee Jackson are recounted in Jackson's *Four Trips to Antiquity* (San Diego State University Press, 1991) and in his *Burros and Paintbrushes* and *It's a Long Road to Commandu* (Texas A&M Press, 1985 and 1987; permission to quote granted). Development of poetic glass is detailed in Paul Gardner, *The Glass of Frederick Carder* (1971). *Architectural Record* (June 1940) and the *Des Moines Register* (special section, April 14, 1940) give lavish coverage to the Bankers Life building. An annotated version of this article is in the *Palimpsest* production files (SHSI, Iowa City).